

Mary Beth Norton

## Women in the Revolution

Most narratives of the Revolutionary War concentrate upon describing a series of pitched battles between uniformed armies. Yet the impact of the conflict can more accurately be assessed if it is interpreted as a civil war with profound consequences for the entire population. Every movement of troops through the American countryside brought a corresponding flight of refugees, an invasion of epidemic disease, the expropriation of foodstuffs, firewood, and livestock, widespread plundering or destruction of personal property, and occasional incidents of rape. In addition to bearing these common burdens of warfare, Americans who remained loyal to the Crown had to contend with persecution, property confiscation, and forced exile, as did patriots who lived in areas controlled by the British, although for them such reverses were only temporary.

The disruption of normal patterns of life that resulted from all these seldom-studied aspects of the conflict had an especially noticeable effect upon women, whose prewar experiences had been confined largely to the domestic realm. With their menfolk away serving in the armies for varying lengths of time, white female Americans had to venture into new fields of endeavor. In the midst of wartime trials, they alone had to make crucial decisions involving not only household and family but also the "outdoor affairs" from which they had formerly been excluded. After initially expressing hesitation about their ability to assume these new responsibilities, many white women gained

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a new appreciation of their own capacity and of the capability of their sex in general as they learned to handle unfamiliar tasks.

For black women, too, the war brought changes. Most notably, the British policy of offering freedom to runaway slaves encouraged a significant percentage of them to abandon their home plantations in order to seek refuge with the redcoats. In times of peace, the vast majority of runaways were youthful males, but ready access to the British army in the South during the later years of the war enabled even mothers encumbered with many children to take advantage of the opportunity to win freedom for themselves and their offspring. Of the many ironies of black-white relations in the revolutionary era, one of the most striking was the fact that while American whites were struggling against British attempts to "enslave" them, American blacks correctly regarded those same redcoats as liberators.

### I

White women's experiences with wartime disruptions varied according to the region in which they lived, for the war did not affect all Americans equally at all times. New Englanders had to cope with turmoil first, but after the British evacuated Boston in 1776, the northern section of the country was relatively free of armed conflict, with the exception of coastal areas, which remained continually open to attack from the sea. In the middle states, by contrast, the continuing presence of the British army in New York City and environs from July 1776 to November 1783 and the redcoats' brief occupation of Philadelphia in 1777-1778 meant that many families had no respite from the dangers of warfare for a period of years. Although the South, on the other hand, was little touched by the war before 1778, subsequent British army movements and the internecine guerrilla conflict that raged incessantly through the backcountry had a devastating impact on the economy and society. Each of these regional patterns had different consequences for the female population.

Yet there was also similarity among women's experiences. Northerners and southerners responded alike to such stimuli as the looming threat of invasion by enemy troops, the incidence of disease, or the opportunity to accompany their husbands to the army. . . .

When news of the British sortie from Boston spread rapidly through New England towns on April 19, 1775, panic struck a civilian population awakened from "benign Slumbers" by the "beat of drum and ringing of Bell." Sixty-seven years later, Susan Mason Smith, who was thirteen in 1775, still vividly remembered that night of terror. Although her family decided not to leave their Salem home because they did not know where to find safety, she did not remove her shoes for several days thereafter, afraid to be unprepared for the next alarm. Many other families made the opposite choice, for on the morning of April 20 an observer found the roads around Boston "filled with frightened women and children, some in carts with their tattered

furniture, others on foot fleeing into the woods." In the months that followed such scenes became commonplace in New England. After the battle of Bunker Hill, during which much of Charlestown was destroyed by fire, James Warren reported from Watertown that "it is impossible to describe the Confusion in this place, Women and Children flying into the County, armed Men Going to the field, and wounded Men returning from there fill the Streets."

Even though no other major clashes occurred in the area, life did not soon return to normal, especially for those who resided near the coast. "We live in continual Expectation of Hostilities," Abigail Adams told her husband shortly after the destruction of Charlestown. A month earlier four British ships had dropped anchor nearby in search of forage, creating another panic. "People women children from the Iron Works flocking down this Way—every woman and child above or from below my Fathers," she wrote then, conveying a sense of distraction even in her prose. "My Fathers family flying, the Drs. in great distress, . . . my Aunt had her Bed thrown into a cart, into which she got herself, and ordered the boy to drive her off[]."

The same images of disorder reverberated through later descriptions of similar scenes. "I arrived here late last night and found people in the utmost confusion, Families, Women, Children, & Luggage all along the road as I came, moving different ways," reported a Georgian in 1776 after an Indian raid. Rumors that the British were sailing up the Chesapeake that same year elicited an identical reaction in Annapolis, "what with the darkness of the night, thunder, lightning, and rain, cries of women and children, people hurrying their effects into the country, drums beating to arms, etc." Many of the refugees must have felt like Helena Kortwright Brasher, who, when she and her family fled from the British attack on Esopus, New York, asked, "Where God can we fly from danger? All places appear equally precarious," or like Ann Eliza Bleeker of Tomhannick, New York, whose friends and relatives "scattered like a flock of frightened birds" before the "hurricane" of Burgoyne's invasion in the fall of 1777. Mrs. Bleeker, who never recovered her emotional equilibrium after the death of her baby daughter on that wild flight, wrote of how she and her children had wandered "solitary through the dark woods, expecting every moment to meet the bloody ally of Britain [the Indians]," before reaching the safety of Albany. Over two years later Mrs. Bleeker told a friend, "Alas! the wilderness is within: I muse so long on the dead until I am unfit for the company of the living." The eighty-six-year-old widow of a revolutionary soldier obviously spoke for many when she observed in 1840, "There was so much Suffering, and so many alarms in our neighborhood in those hard times, that it has always been painful for me to dwell upon them."

Faced with the uncertain dangers of flight, some, like the Mason family of Salem before them, decided to remain where they were. In 1777 a Pennsylvanian told John Adams resolutely that "if the two opposite Armys were to come here alternately ten times, she would stand by her Property untill

she should be kill'd. If she must be a Beggar, it should be where she was known." Hannah Irede'll's sister Jean Blair made the same choice in 1781 when the redcoats neared her North Carolina home. "The English are certainly at Halifax but I suppose they will be every where & I will fix myself here it is as safe as any where else & I can be no longer tossed about," she declared. The Philadelphian Elizabeth Farnar also decided to stay in her house, despite the fact that it lay between the lines during the occupation of the city in 1777-1778. As a result, she, her husband, and their daughter were endangered by frequent gunfire, had difficulty obtaining adequate food supplies, and suffered "manny cold days" that winter because the British confiscated their firewood. "Notwithstanding we thought ourselves well off[ ] in comparison to some," she remarked in 1783. "Most of the houses near us have been either burnt or pulled down as would have been the case with us if we had not stayd in it even at the hasard of our lives." . . .

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Even after the redcoats' long-awaited departure, Boston, said one resident, was not "that agreeable place it once was—Almost every thing here, appears Gloomy & Malancholy." One of the chief reasons for the Bostonians' gloom was the presence of epidemic disease in their midst. The unhealthy conditions in the besieged city had helped to incubate both smallpox and dysentery, and an epidemic of the latter had already swept the Massachusetts countryside the preceding fall, killing Abigail Adams's mother and niece, among many others. "The desolation of War is not so distressing as the Havock made by the pestilence," Abigail remarked then. She could do nothing to prevent the deaths from dysentery, but smallpox was another matter. After it became clear that the disease would probably spread across New England, carried by soldiers returning from the army that had invaded Canada as well as by Bostonians, she began making arrangements to have herself and her children inoculated.

Abigail Adams and other eighteenth-century Americans could not reach such a decision lightly, for inoculation required being deliberately infected with the disease. Waiting to take smallpox "in the natural way" was to court death, yet no parents wanted to place their children knowingly into mortal danger or to risk their serious disfigurement. Accordingly, adults usually postponed inoculation for themselves and their offspring as long as possible. The war forced them to face the issue directly, since smallpox followed the armies so inevitably that some Americans charged the British with the "hellish Policy" of intentionally spreading the disease. Therefore, whenever a large number of soldiers from either side arrived in a given area, parents had to make life-or-death decisions. Indeed, like Abigail Adams, many wives were forced to reach those decisions on their own in the absence of their husbands. . . .

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In addition to carrying smallpox, the armies brought a specific terror to American women: the fear of rape. The only female New Englanders who personally confronted this problem on a large scale were residents of Fairfield and New Haven, the Connecticut towns raided by English and Hessian troops in early July 1779. Shortly after the raid, the Continental Congress collected depositions from women who had been attacked by the redcoats. Two local residents declared that they had fought off sexual assaults with the help of passersby, but Christiana Catter was not so fortunate. Her husband, who had been severely beaten by the British earlier in the day, ran away when a group of soldiers broke into their home at half past two in the morning. "Two of them laid hold of me and threw me on the Bed and swore if I made any noise or Resistance they would kill me in a moment," Mrs. Catter testified, so "I was obliged to Submit" to each of them in turn. Her fate was hardly enviable, yet far worse were the circumstances of girls living on Staten Island and in New Jersey, who during the fall and winter of 1776 were subjected to repeated rapes by British troops stationed in the area. Whereas the Connecticut incidents and other similar occurrences took place in the context of brief excursions in search of plunder, the 1776 rapes were both systematic and especially brutal. . . .

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Depositions collected by the Continental Congress gave the most vivid accounts of the experiences of women in New Jersey in late 1776. Particularly revealing are those that pertain to a series of incidents at the home of Edmund Palmer, an elderly Hunterdon County farmer. One December day, a number of British soldiers from a nearby camp came to the house. One of them dragged Palmer's thirteen-year-old granddaughter, Abigail, into a back room. She "Scream'd & begged of him to let her alone, but some of Said Soldiers said they would knock her Eyes out if she did not hold her Tongue." Over the ineffectual pleas of her grandfather and her aunt Mary Phillips, Abigail was raped three times. Abigail testified that "for three Days successively, Divers Soldiers would come to the House & Treat her in the Same manner." On one of those days, her aunt Mary was raped in the barn and her friend Sarah Cain, who had come to comfort her, was also assaulted. Finally, on the evening of the third day two soldiers demanded that Abigail and Sarah's younger sister Elisabeth, who was fifteen, accompany them to their camp. "One of them Said he had come for his Girl, & Swore he would have her, & Seiz'd hold of her Hand & told her to Bundle up her Cloaths for she should go with them," Abigail recounted. She and Elisabeth were then forced into another room despite the efforts of Edmund Palmer and Elisabeth's father, Thomas. Elisabeth recalled that "the said Soldiers Ravished them both and then took them away to their Camp, where they was both Treated by some others of the Soldiers in the same cruel manner," until they were rescued by an officer. After spending the night at a nearby farmhouse, the

girls went home—not to Palmer's, but to Thomas Cain's. And there they were evidently safe, for they told the investigators of no further attacks. . . .

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... What distinguished the war in Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas from that in the North was its length and ferocious intensity. From the invasion of Georgia in 1778 to the ratification of the peace treaty in 1783, the South was the main theater of war, and there battles were not confined to the formal clashes between armies that had characterized the northern phase of the conflict. A prolonged guerrilla war, coupled with sporadic non-partisan plundering and the wanderings of the British army through North Carolina and Virginia in 1780–1781, left much of the South devastated. David Ramsay's assessment of South Carolina can accurately be applied to the entire region: "[T]here was scarcely an inhabitant of the State, however obscure in character or remote in situation, whether he remained firm to one party or changed with the times, who did not partake of the general distress."

Thus Georgians and South Carolinians universally complained of the "Banditti" who raided, pillaged, and looted through their states. "Property of every kind has been taken from its Inhabitants, their Negroes, Horses & Cattle drove & carried away," declared a Georgian in 1779. That same year a South Carolinian commented that the "Havoc" caused by the robbers "is not to be described. Great Numbers of Women and Children have been left without a 2nd Shift of Clothes. The furniture which they could not carry off they wantonly broke, burnt, and destroyed." Fifteen months later Eliza Lucas Pinckney observed that "the plantations have been some quite, some nearly ruined and all with very few exceptions great sufferers[. T]heir Crops, stock, boats, Carts etc. all gone taken or destroyed and the Crops made this year must be very small by the desertion of the Negroes in planting and hoeing time." Virginia was not so seriously affected as its neighboring states to the south, but there too the distress was great in the months before the American victory at Yorktown.

Eliza Wilkinson's account of her life in the South Carolina sea islands during the 1780 British invasion dramatically conveys the sense of fear and uncertainty she felt. The area was completely at the mercy of the redcoats, she noted, with "nothing but women, a few aged gentlemen, and (shame to tell) some skulking varlets" to oppose them. On one "day of terror" in early June, she recounted, a British troop accompanied by armed blacks robbed her home of clothes and jewelry, using "the most abusive language imaginable, while making as if to hew us to pieces with their swords." After the looters had left, "I trembled so with terror, that I could not support myself," she wrote two years later, recalling that she had "indulged in the most melancholy reflections. The whole world appeared to me as a theatre, where nothing was acted but cruelty, bloodshed, and oppression; where neither age nor sex escaped the horrors of injustice and violence; where the lives and property of

the innocent and inoffensive were in continual danger, and the lawless power ranged at large." In the aftermath of the attack, Mrs. Wilkinson revealed, "[W]e could neither eat, drink, nor sleep in peace; for as we lay in our clothes every night, we could not enjoy the little sleep we got. . . . Our nights were wearisome and painful, our days spent in anxiety and melancholy."

But what to Eliza Wilkinson and her fellow whites was a time of trouble and distress was for their slaves a period of unprecedented opportunity. The continuing presence of the British army in the South held out to black men and women alike the prospect of winning their freedom from bondage, for in an attempt to disrupt the Americans' labor supply and acquire additional manpower, British commanders offered liberty to slaves who would flock to the royal standard. No sex or age restrictions limited the offer to adult men alone, and so women fled to the redcoat encampments, often taking their children with them.

The detailed plantation records kept by Thomas Jefferson and John Ball make it possible to identify the family relationships of runaways from their lands. Among the twenty-three slaves who abandoned Jefferson's Virginia holdings were ten adult women and three girls. Of the five female adults who can be traced with certainty, two left with their husbands, one of them accompanied by children as well; another fled with three of her four offspring; and the remaining two, one of whom was married, ventured forth by themselves. The fifty-three blacks who fled John Ball's plantations in 1780 included eighteen women, among them eight mothers with children, some of the latter still infants. Charlotte, a childless woman whose family connections are unknown, probably led a mass escape from Ball's Kensington quarter. She originally left the plantation on May 10, in company with Bessy and her three children, but she was soon recaptured. A week later she ran away again, this time along with (and perhaps as a guide for) what Ball termed "Pino's gang." This fifteen-member group, which escaped via Ball's flatboat, was composed of Pino, his wife, their youngest daughter, and one of their two granddaughters; their daughter, Jewel, her husband, Dicky, and son, Little Pino; Dicky's sister, her husband, and their daughter; and Eleanor Lawrence, her husband, Brutus, and their two daughters. Although it is not clear whether Eleanor was related to the Pino clan, her sister Flora had also absconded to the British, along with an infant son, two weeks previously.

The impressions one receives from such fragmentary evidence—both of large numbers of female runaways and of families leaving together—are confirmed by an examination of records kept at the evacuation of New York City. Each time the British left an American port in the later years of the war, they carried large numbers of former slaves away with them, approximately ten thousand from Savannah and Charleston alone. Because the preliminary peace terms accepted in November 1782 included a clause requiring the British to return slaves to American owners, Sir Guy Carleton, the British commander, ordered the enumeration of all blacks who claimed the protection of the army. Crude biographical details were obtained from former slaves

then within the lines in order to ascertain whether they should be allowed to embark with the troops for England and Nova Scotia. Blacks who had belonged to loyalists were excluded from the promise of freedom offered by the British during the war, as were any who had joined the British after November 1782. But Carleton believed himself obliged to ensure the liberty of all the others.

Of the 2,863 persons whose sex is specified on the surviving embarkation lists (119 small children were not differentiated by sex), 1,211 (or 42.3 percent) were female and 1,652 (57.7 percent) were male. The substantial proportion of female runaways reflects the ease with which even a woman with children could seek freedom when the British army was encamped only a few miles from her home. Further, the analysis of the age structure of those on the New York City lists indicates that women often brought children with them into the lines. Nearly 17 percent of the refugees were nine years of age or younger, and fully 32 percent were under twenty. Slightly more than a quarter of the mature women were explicitly identified as being accompanied by children, and the addition of other likely cases brings that proportion to 40 percent. Disregarding the 96 children who had been born free in British-held territory, each mature woman who joined the royal forces had an average of 1.6 children at her side.

An examination of familial relationships from the standpoint of the 605 children (503 of them nine years old or under) listed on the embarkation rolls shows that 3 percent were accompanied solely by fathers, 17 percent were with both parents, 56.2 percent with mothers alone, and 24.3 percent with other relatives, some of whom may have been parents but who are not explicitly noted as such on the occasionally incomplete records. These families included such groups as Prince Princes, aged fifty-three, his forty-year-old wife, Margaret, their twenty-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, with her "small child," and their son, Erick, who was eleven; "Jane Thompson 70 worn out wt a grand child 5 y[er] old"; and Hannah Whitten, thirty, with her five children, ages eight, seven, six, five, and one. The five-member Sawyer clan of Norfolk, Virginia, evidently used the opportunity to seek freedom with the British as a means of reuniting. Before they all ran away in 1776, the family was divided among three owners: the mother and a child in one location, two children in another, and the father in a third. In all, despite the preponderance among the refugees of young, single adults, 40 percent of the total, like the Sawyers and the others just noted, appear to have been accompanied by relatives of some kind.

To arrive at New York City, the blacks listed on the British records had had to survive many dangers and hardships, not the least of which was the prevalence of epidemic diseases in the encampments to which they had fled. Yet they were not entirely safe even in British-occupied Manhattan. The minutes of the joint Anglo-American board established to adjudicate claims under the peace treaty reveal liberty lost on legal technicalities important to the presiding officers but of little meaning to the blacks involved. Mercy and

her three children were returned to her master because, as a resident of Westchester County, New York, she had not lived outside the British lines and so could not have come within them voluntarily to earn the protection of the freedom proclamation. Elizabeth Truant remained the property of a New Jerseyite because she had not joined the British until April 1783, after the signing of the preliminary peace terms. And, tragically, Samuel Doson, who in 1778 had kidnapped his two children from the house of their owner in order to bring them with him into New York, lost them to that same man in 1783, after he and his youngsters had already boarded a ship bound for Nova Scotia. He himself was likewise reclaimed by his loyalist master.

When enslaved men and women decided whether to run away they could not see into the future and understand the full implications of British policy for their ultimate fate. But many undoubtedly heard the tales of dis-ease in the refugee camps, and others (like some belonging to Eliza Lucas Pinckney) were undoubtedly so "attached to their homes and the little they have there [that they] have refused to remove." Indeed, amid the chaos of war, plantation life sometimes bore little resemblance to that of peacetime. Remaining at home in a known environment, surrounded by friends and relatives, could seem an attractive alternative to an uncertain future as a refugee, especially when white owners and overseers could no longer control the situation. For her part, Mrs. Pinckney simply surrendered to the inevitable. Speaking of her slaves, she observed to her son Thomas in the spring of 1779 that "they all do now what they please every where." The blacks on Thomas's Ashepoo plantation were no less troublesome. They "pay no Attention" to the overseer's orders, he told his mother; and the pregnant women and small children were "now perfectly free & live upon the best produce of the Plantation."

If black women chose to run away to the redcoats, they risked their lives and those of their children, but they gained the possibility of freedom in Canada, the United States, or even Africa as a reward. If they decided to stay at home, they continued in bondage but kept all their family ties intact. It must have been a wrenching decision, regardless of which choice they made. The Revolutionary War brought blacks a full share of heartbreak and pain, even as it provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to free themselves from servitude.

## II

The experiences of white women during the Revolutionary War were affected by the extent of their husbands' political activism as well as by the region in which their families lived. Wives of ardent patriots and loyalists alike were left alone for varying lengths of time while their spouses served in the army or, in the case of loyalists, took refuge behind the British lines. Although women could stay with their soldier husbands and earn their own

keep by serving as army cooks, nurses, or laundresses, most did not find this an attractive alternative. Life in the military camps was hard, and army commanders, while recognizing that female laborers did essential work, tended to regard them as a hindrance rather than an asset. Only in rare cases—such as the time when the laundresses attached to General Anthony Wayne's regiment staged a strike in order to ensure that they would be adequately paid—were camp followers able to ameliorate their living and working conditions. Consequently, most women who joined the army probably did so from necessity, lacking any other means of support during their husbands' absence.

At least, though, patriot women had a choice. For the most part, loyalists were not so fortunate. From the day they and their spouses revealed their loyalty to the Crown, their fate was sealed. Like other eighteenth-century women, their lives had focused on their homes, but because of their political beliefs they lost not only those homes but also most of their possessions, and they had to flee to alien lands as well. Understandably, they often had difficulty coping with their problems. Only those women who had had some experience beyond the household prior to the war were able to manage their affairs in exile in England, Canada, or the West Indies with more than a modicum of success.

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The women who found it easiest to adjust to their new circumstances were those few who had previously engaged in business. Elizabeth Murray Smith Inman provides a case in point. She and her third husband, Ralph, were separated by the unexpected start of the war, for he was paying a visit to friends in Boston on April 19. With him trapped in the besieged city, Elizabeth set to work managing their farms, dismissing her anxiety "with a laugh," telling friends, "[W]e could die but once, and I was a predestinarian, therefore had no personal fear." It was consequently with astonishment and anger that she learned Ralph had panicked and intended to depart alone for London, without leaving her a power of attorney so she could act on his behalf in his absence. Is this a proper return "for the many anxious and fatiguing days I have had"? she asked him bitterly. "Believe me, Mr. Inman, I am not anxious about a mentinence [sic]," Elizabeth declared self-assuredly. "Experience has taught me, water-gruel and salt for supper and breakfast, with a bit of meat, a few greens or roots, are enough for me." Indeed, experience had taught her more than that: one of the reasons she was reluctant to leave Cambridge was the fact that she had just harvested a good crop of hay, a commodity much in demand by the rebel army, and she anticipated sizable profits. In the end, Ralph Inman did not emigrate, but his wife never forgave him for his cowardice. As one of her female friends commented, Elizabeth Murray Inman was "above the little fears and weaknesses which are the inseparable companions of most of our sex," and she had no patience with those

who did not meet her high standards. Ten years later, when she wrote her will, she left Ralph only a tiny proportion of her large fortune.

Another loyalist woman who had little difficulty in adjusting to her spouse's absence was Grace Crowden Galloway, but for very different reasons. The unhappily married Mrs. Galloway found that she welcomed Joseph's exile. "Ye Liberty of doing as I please Makes even poverty more agreeable than any time I ever spent since I married," she wrote in her diary five months after his departure; "his Unkind treatment makes me easy Nay happy not to be with him & if he is safe I want not to be kept so like a slave as he always Made Me in preventing every wish of my heart." As a result, she resisted his attempts to persuade her to join him and their daughter Betsy in England, partly because she wanted to try to preserve the property she had inherited from her father for Betsy, but also because she distrusted Joseph, having realized that he had mismanaged that same property. With unusual insight into her own psyche, she confided to her journal in August 1779 that her frequent tirades against the British were in fact aimed at her husband: "as his ill conduct has ruin'd me & as I cannot tell ye world I abuse the English Army for their base & treacherous conduct," she disclosed.

Most women, of course, did not feel such relief when their husbands left home during the war. Quite the contrary: like a New Englander, they discovered that "every trouble however trifling I feel with double weight in your absence." Nevertheless, as time passed they learned to rely increasingly on their own judgment and ability, for they had no alternative. . . .

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After months and sometimes years of controlling their own affairs, women tended to reply testily when their husbands persisted in assuming their subservience. In the summer of 1776, for instance, Sally Cobb Paine—who had been on her own since the fall of 1774—chided her husband, Robert, for not giving her adequate directions about what she should do with some legal papers. She ignored the financial arrangements he had made for her support and informed him flatly, "[W]e have sow'd our oats as you desired had I been master I should have planted it to Corn." Finally, she decided to pursue a court case against his express wishes. "[I]f it had been Let alone till your return their [sic] would have been nothing Left for us." Mrs. Paine had clearly become accustomed to making her own decisions, and if her husband gave orders contrary to her inclinations, she either ignored him or let him know that she disagreed with his judgment. . . .

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Previous colonial wars and the obligations of business, religion, or politics had occasionally separated some American couples in the nearly two centuries that preceded the Revolution. But those separations had been spo-

radic and isolated, the experiences of individuals rather than of an entire society. By contrast, the disruptions of the revolutionary years affected all Americans, to a greater or lesser degree. The cumulative result was the partial breakdown and reinterpretation of the gender roles that had hitherto remained unexamined.

### III

"Imitate your husbands fortitude, it is as much a female, as a masculine virtue, and we stand in as much need of it to act our part properly," Eliza Lucas Pinckney instructed her daughter-in-law in 1780. The following year William Hooper proudly proclaimed that his wife, Anne, had shown "a masculine patriotism and virtue." Thomas Cushing, a Massachusetts congressman, described to his wife, Deborah, how John Dickinson, seeing the "patriotic, calm & undaunted spirit" displayed in her letters, declared that "if it was customary to choose Women into the Assembly, he should be heartily for choosing you Speaker of the House." In short, as a New Englander remarked with respect to the wives of American diplomats, both men and women came to realize that female patriots "deserve as much reputation as their husbands and posterity will thicken laurels on their monuments."

The war, in other words, dissolved some of the distinctions between masculine and feminine traits. Women who would previously have risked criticism if they abandoned their "natural" feminine timidity now found themselves praised for doing just that. The line between male and female behavior, once apparently so impenetrable, became less well defined. It by no means disappeared, but requisite adjustments to wartime conditions brought a new recognition of the fact that traditional sex roles did not provide adequate guidelines for conduct under all circumstances. When Betsy Ambler Brent looked back on her youth from the perspective of 1810, she observed, "[N]ecessity taught us to use exertions which our girls of the present day know nothing of. We Were forced to industry to appear genteely, to study Manners to supply the place of Education, and to endeavor by amiable and agreeable conduct to make amends for the loss of fortune."

The realization that they had been equally affected by the war led some women to expect equal treatment thereafter and, on occasion, to apply to their own circumstances the general principles promulgated by the revolutionaries. "I have Don as much to Carrey on the war as meny that Sett Now at ye healm of government & No Notice taken of me," complained the New Jersey widow Rachel Wells as she protested to the Continental Congress in 1786 about a technicality that deprived her of interest payments on the money she had invested in state bonds during the war. "If she did not fight She throw in all her mite which bought ye Sogers food & Clothing & Let them have Blankets," she explained, asking only for the "justice" due her. "Others gits their Intrust & why then a poor old widow be put off[?]" Mrs. Wells asked. "Now gentlemen is this Liberty?"



The war necessarily broke down the barrier which seemed to insulate women from the realm of politics, for they, no less than men, were caught up in the turmoil that enveloped the entire populace. Although some Americans tried to maintain the traditional fiction that a woman was "consequently no party in the present war" or that, in one woman's words, "as a Woman I cannot or at least I will not be a Traytor to either side," most understood that the old notions had to be discarded. Abigail Adams is a case in point. In June 1776, she still adhered to the conventional formula, telling John, "I can serve my partner, my family and myself, and enjoy the Satisfaction of your serving your Country," thereby indicating that she believed her contributions to the patriots' cause had to be filtered through the medium of her husband. But less than two years later, in February 1778, she described her "satisfaction in the Consciousness of having discharged my duty to the publick." Like others of her contemporaries, she no longer drew a sharp dividing line between the feminine sphere and the masculine realm of public responsibilities.

But to recognize that women had a role to fulfill in the wider society was not to declare that male and female roles were, or should be, the same. Not even Judith Sargent Murray conceived of an androgynous world; men's and women's functions were to be equal and complementary, not identical. And so the citizens of the republic set out to discover and define woman's public role. They found it not in the notion that women should directly participate in politics, New Jersey's brief experiment with woman suffrage to the contrary. Rather, they located woman's public role in her domestic responsibilities, in her obligation to create a supportive home life for her husband, and particularly in her duty to raise republican sons who would love their country and preserve its virtuous character.

The ironies of this formulation were manifest. On the one hand, society had at last formally recognized women's work as valuable. No longer was domesticity denigrated; no longer was the feminine sphere subordinated to the masculine, nor were women regarded as inferior. The white women of nineteenth-century America could take pride in their sex in a way their female ancestors could not. The importance of motherhood was admitted by all, and women could glory in the special role laid out for them in the copious literature that rhapsodized about beneficent feminine influences both inside and outside the home.

But, on the other hand, the republican definition of womanhood, which began as a marked step forward, grew ever more restrictive as the decades passed. Woman's domestic and maternal role came to be seen as so important that it was believed women sacrificed their femininity if they attempted to be more (or other) than wives and mothers. Accordingly, the women who were most successful in winning society's acceptance of their extradomestic activities were those who—like teachers, missionaries, or charitable workers—managed to conceal their flouting of convention by subsuming their actions within the confines of an orthodox, if somewhat broadened, conception of womanhood and its proper functions.

Mary Willing Byrd's social standing was much higher than that of Rachel Wells, but she advanced a similar argument when she contended in 1781 that Virginia had treated her unfairly. She claimed the right to redress of grievances "as a female, as the parent of eight children, as a virtuous citizen, as a friend to my Country, and as a person, who never violated the laws of her Country." Byrd's recital of her qualifications was peculiarly feminine in its attention to her sex and her role as a parent (no man would have included such items on a list describing himself), but it was also sexless in its references to her patriotism and her character as a "virtuous citizen." In developing the implications of the latter term, Byrd arrived at her most important point. "I have paid my taxes and have not been Personally, or Virtually represented," she observed. "My property is taken from me and I have no redress."

The echoes of revolutionary ideology were deliberate. Mary Byrd wanted the men she addressed to think about the issue of her status as a woman, and she adopted the revolutionaries' own language in order to make her point. The same tactic was employed by Abigail Adams in her most famous exchange with her husband.

In March 1776, after admonishing John to "Remember the Ladies" and to offer them legal protection from "the unlimited power" of their husbands, Abigail issued a warning in terms that John must have found exceedingly familiar. "If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies," Abigail declared, "we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." On one level, she was speaking tongue-in-cheek; she did not mean her husband to take the threat seriously. Yet she chose to make a significant observation about women's inferior legal status by putting a standard argument to new use and by applying to the position of women striking phraseology previously employed only in the male world of politics. Like Mary Willing Byrd, Abigail Adams thus demonstrated an unusual sensitivity to the possible egalitarian resonances of revolutionary ideology and showed an awareness of implications that seem to have escaped the notice of American men.

In 1782, Mrs. Adams once again directed her attention to the role of women in the American polity. This time she made no semihumorous comments but instead considered seriously the ramifications of her sex's inferior status. "Patriotism in the female Sex is the most disinterested of all virtues," she contended, because women are "excluded from honours and from offices." Their property is controlled by their husbands, "to whom the Laws have given a sovereign Authority," and they are "deprived of a voice in Legislation, obliged to submit to those Laws which are imposed upon [them]." No levity softened the sincerity of the point she made for the second time. To Abigail, the fact that women demonstrated "patriotick virtue" despite being discriminated against validated their claims to "heroick" stature. . . .

In the prerevolutionary world, no one had bothered to define domesticity: the private realm seemed unimportant, and besides, women could not escape their inevitable destiny. In the postrevolutionary world, the social significance of household and family was recognized, and simultaneously women began to be able to choose different ways of conducting their lives. As a direct result, a definition of domesticity was at last required. The process of defining woman's proper role may well have stiffened the constraints that had always encircled female lives, but that definition also—by its very existence—signaled American society's growing comprehension of woman's importance within a sphere far wider than a private household or a marital relationship.

The legacy of the American Revolution for women was thus ambiguous. Republican womanhood eventually became Victorian womanhood, but at the same time the egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution provided the women's rights movement with its earliest vocabulary, and the republican academies produced its first leaders. Few historical events can ever be assessed in absolute terms. With respect to its impact on women, the American Revolution is no exception.